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# The Influence of the Conflict in Ukraine (2014–2018) on Germany's Relations with Russia

## Introduction

Historical traditions of the German-Russian cooperation, gratitude for Moscow's consent for the German unification in 1991, and hopes for profitable business relations resulted in the fact that relations with Russia were given the highest priority (*Russia first!*) in the eastern policy of united Germany. At least until 2013, Berlin considered Russia to be one of the most important elements stabilising European security and a reliable supplier of strategic raw materials. Relations with the Russian Federation were dominated by the formula of 'strategic' or even, under Gerhard Schroeder's chancellorship, 'cordial partnership'. On the economic side, it was symbolised by the Nord Stream 1 pipeline as well as extensive contacts institutionalised in the form of the German-Russian Forum existing since 1993, and the Petersburg Dialogue<sup>1</sup> since 2001.

In such a situation, independent Ukraine declaring its pro-European orientation and counting on Germany's help in anchoring in the European structures was treated in Berlin as a troublesome partner. Germany did indeed sign 15 various bilateral

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<sup>1</sup> More: M.M. Kosman, *Polityka RFN wobec ZSRR/Rosji w latach 1989–2009*, Bydgoszcz 2013; A. Stempień, *Sojusznicy. Od Fryderyka I i Katarzyny Wielkiej do Merkel i Putina*, Warszawa 2016; A. Stent, *Rivalen des Jahrhunderts. Deutschland und Rußland im neuen Europa*, Berlin–München 2000; A. Rahr, *Russland gibt Gas. Die Rückkehr einer Weltmacht*, München 2008; E. Cziomer, 'Polityka Republiki Federalnej Niemiec wobec Wspólnoty Niepodległych Państw u progu XXI wieku ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem miejsca i roli Rosji', *Państwo i Społeczeństwo*, 2001, no. 1, pp. 21–22.

agreements with Ukraine in the initial years of its independence and greatly contributed to signing by Kiev the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the European Union (1994), the EU-Ukrainian Action Plan (1996), and the Common Strategy on Ukraine (1999), but – in order not to displease President Vladimir Putin – avoided discussing the prospect of the Ukrainian membership in the organisation. The Germans clearly suggested that the EU-Ukrainian cooperation can be crowned with nothing more than an association agreement and visa-free travel<sup>2</sup>.

After taking office as president after the 2010 elections, Victor Yanukovich did indeed aim at concluding the association agreement with the EU, but at the same time he maintained close relationships with Moscow. He signed an agreement on extending the stationing of the Russian Black Sea Fleet until 2042 and, in 2012, decided to adopt a law on the Russian language. In Brussels, an opinion was being formed – which, to a large degree, was the German diplomacy's doing – that it was not worthwhile to engage in a country which had practically come to terms with its existence in the Russian sphere of influence and that the historical Ukrainian-Russian connections should be respected. Despite verbal assurances, neither the government of the grand coalition CDU/CSU-SPD (2005–2009) nor CDU/CSU-FDP (2009–2013) with Angela Merkel as Chancellor saw any contradiction between Putin's authoritarian rule – gagging the freedom of the media and destroying the opposition – and developing economic cooperation profitable for both sides. Germany believed that with the use of Partnership for Modernisation with Russia, a programme devised by Federal Foreign Minister Frank-Walter Steinmeier in 2008 and later imposed on the entire European Union (2009), it would be possible to introduce democratic standards in Russia, liberalise the economy and bring the Russian Federation closer to the European structures. High hopes were pinned to the presidency of a dynamic technocrat Dmitry Medvedev (2008–2012)<sup>3</sup>.

Changing Putin for Medvedev as the President of Russia in 2012, followed by anti-democratic reforms introduced by the new administration in the autumn of the same year, caused consternation and disorientation in Germany. The existing consensus, assuming that Russia's democratisation and integration with Europe are keys to the old continent's security, was undermined. Europe was running out of ideas on how to relate to more and more authoritarian Russia. Until then, all parties represented in the Bundestag, relying on an unwritten political agreement believed that relations with Russia played an exceptional role in the German and the EU eastern policy. As Jochen Franzke, an expert on the Russian-German relations of the University of Potsdam, wrote there appeared a problem whether the 'Westphalian solution' known since 1648 should be applied to Russia, or whether it should be considered that there existed a strong connection (*unctim*) between economic and security

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<sup>2</sup> B. Koszel, 'Germany's attitude towards the association agreement between the European Union and Ukraine', *Przegląd Politologiczny*, 2016, no. 2. See: P. Kost, *Ukraina wobec Unii Europejskiej 1991–2010*, Toruń 2012.

<sup>3</sup> E. Cziomer, *Polityka zagraniczna Niemiec w dobie nowych wyzwań globalizacji, bezpieczeństwa międzynarodowego oraz integracji po 2005 roku*, Warszawa 2010, p. 218; B. Koszel, 'Meandry polityki niemieckiej wobec Rosji w okresie rządów prezydenta Dmitrija Miedwiediewa (2008–2012)', *Krakowskie Studia Międzynarodowe*, 2017, no. 2, pp. 93–114.

cooperation and observing democratic laws and civil liberties, which thereby should enforce a particular model of cooperation with Russia<sup>4</sup>.

The results of the parliamentary elections for the Bundestag from 22 September 2013 forced the Christian Democrats to renew the unwanted coalition with the Social Democrats because the Liberals' results were poor and they did not enter the Bundestag. This inevitably decided about certain concessions towards Russia and reticence towards Ukraine. The coalition agreement of 27 November included an exceptionally generous offer for Russia, which was hidden under the title 'Open dialogue and enhanced cooperation' (*Offener Dialog und breitere Zusammenarbeit mit Russland*)<sup>5</sup>.

## The annexation of Crimea

The formal suspension of the signing of the association agreement with the EU by Ukraine on 21 November 2013, which resulted from President Putin's pressure backed by promises of generous financial support, triggered social discontent which spilled out into the streets of Kiev. After the outbreak of bloody riots in the streets of the capital, most of the German media sided with the protesters from the very beginning, yet politicians urged them to be sensible and conciliative. Relying upon their own example of the Berlin Wall fall and seeking unification, journalists and, frequently, simple citizens of Germany reacted kindly to the 'revolution of dignity' demonstrated on the barricades of the Independence Square<sup>6</sup>. While the Union parties and the Green Party unequivocally sided with the protesters, Die Linke openly supported President Yanukovich and the SPD took an ambiguous attitude. In a TV interview on 18 February, Foreign Minister F.-W. Steinmeier held both sides responsible for the acts of violence in the streets of Kiev. In a parliamentary debate a day later, the left-wing Members were openly talking about Ukrainian fascists and anti-Semites who seized power<sup>7</sup>. Ulla Jelpke, the party's spokesperson, and Sahra Wagenknecht, the party's deputy leader and a rising media star on the Ukrainian issues, both implied a Western inspiration of the 'putsch' in the Square. They also looked for it in the actions of the USA and the native Ukrainian Stepan Bandera fascists. They defended Russia – oppressed and unjustly accused by Western countries – and demanded prohibiting any aid for Kiev from the EU and the International Monetary Fund (IMF)<sup>8</sup>.

In a declaration of 29 January 2014, the German government announced joint EU patient pursuit for a peaceful settlement of the conflict. It was asserted that the door to the association agreement was still open and that any misunderstandings

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<sup>4</sup> J. Franzke, 'Realität oder Mythos? Zur Strategischen Partnerschaft zwischen Deutschland und Russland', *WeltTrends*, 2013, no. 89, p. 40.

<sup>5</sup> Details: *Deutschlands Zukunft gestalten. Koalitionsvertrag zwischen CDU, CSU und SPD*, pp. 116–118, <https://www.cdu.de/sites/default/files/media/dokumente/koalitionsvertrag.pdf> [accessed: 10.02.2019].

<sup>6</sup> H. Berwanger, R. Karsten, 'Das demokratische Versprechen. Deutsche Außenpolitik im Ukraine-Konflikt', *Die neue Gesellschaft/Frankfurter Hefte*, 2014, no. 61, pp. 41–43.

<sup>7</sup> 'Linke sieht Faschisten bei Opposition in Ukraine', *Die Welt*, 20.02.2014.

<sup>8</sup> 'Linkspartei: Parteinahme des Westens half Faschisten an die Macht', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 10.03.2014; H. Bota, K. Kohlenberg, 'Haben die Amis den Maidan gekauft?', *Die Zeit*, 13.05.2015.

between the Eastern Partnership countries, Russia and the EU should be corrected. Owing to Minister Steinmeier's engagement, together with the Foreign Ministers of Poland and France (R. Sikorski and L. Fabius) acting on behalf of the Weimar Triangle, it was possible to prevent the crisis escalation and to force V. Yanukovych, in a debatable and unconstitutional way, to step down and leave the country. Moscow responded by sending 'little green men' (saboteurs and soldiers concealing their nationality) to Crimea, annexing its territory to Russia on 18 March 2014 on the basis of a hurriedly carried out (16.03) referendum<sup>9</sup>.

The German Chancellor reacted with reserve to Putin's speech of 18 March proclaiming the annexation of Crimea to the Russian Federation, she called for unity among the EU countries, and restricted herself to stating that it was an infringement of international law, yet in parallel with the introduced sanctions, the dialogue with Moscow would be continued<sup>10</sup>. At the beginning of the crisis, she spoke on the phone with V. Putin several times, persuading him to end the conflict and withdraw the army from Ukraine. However, the President of Russia firmly maintained his position that apart from the Russian bases there was not a single soldier of the Russian army in Crimea and that there existed a necessity to protect the rights of Russian citizens persecuted in Crimea by terrorists and Banderists. In her phone conversation with President Barack Obama, at the beginning of March 2014, Merkel expressed scepticism as to whether President Putin was 'in touch with reality'<sup>11</sup>.

On the other hand, Steinmeier, who in his second term as the head of the Auswärtiges Amt ambitiously planned to provide new impulses for cooperation with Russia, had a sense of failure. By then, he was making great efforts to pacify the existing situation. He was travelling to the Baltic countries and to Budapest, he was meeting the Russian Minister of Foreign Affairs Sergey Lavrov and thus putting Germany at the forefront of the countries involved in settling the conflict in Ukraine.

In response to the annexation of Crimea, a day after the referendum, the EU and the USA imposed economic sanctions on the Russian Federation, suspended its participation in the G8, and introduced a prohibition on entering their territories for 21 prominent Kremlin officials (the USA for 31). On 25 March, a boycott of the G8 summit in Sochi was announced. Additionally, a meeting within the framework of the Petersburg Dialogue, scheduled for October 2014, was cancelled<sup>12</sup>.

After a parliamentary debate in the Bundestag on 19 March 2014, certain helplessness could be seen among the Members. It was unknown where Putin would stop and what the limits for the EU concessions should be. It was feared that his

<sup>9</sup> M. Staack, *Der Ukraine-Konflikt, Russland und die europäische Sicherheitsordnung*, Opladen 2017, p. 88.

<sup>10</sup> 'Merkel: entschlossene Antwort Europas', *Die Bundeskanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/merkel-entschlossene-antwort-europas-450192> [accessed: 10.02.2019]. See: M. Sattar, 'Wohl oder übel. Deutsche Reaktion auf Krim-Annexion', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 18.03.2014.

<sup>11</sup> P. Baker, 'Pressure Rising as Obama Works to Rein In Russia', *New York Times*, 2.03.2014.

<sup>12</sup> A. Rinke, 'Wie Putin Berlin verlor. Moskaus Annexion der Krim hat die deutsche Russland-Politik verändert', *Internationale Politik*, 2014, no. 3, pp. 33–45; B. Jurkowicz, 'Relacje niemiecko-rosyjskie w cieniu konfliktu na Ukrainie', *FAE Policy Paper*, 2015, no. 11, <http://docplayer.pl/6169791-Relacje-niemiecko-rosyjskie-w-cieniu-konfliktu-na-ukrainie.html> [accessed: 10.02.2019].

objective would be to annex another part of the Ukrainian territory, lead to its political and economic destabilisation and, in effect, to the state disintegration. Other options were also considered – enhancement of NATO's presence in Eastern Europe and a realistic prospect of Ukraine's membership in the EU. At the same time, concerns were expressed as to whether it would lead to permanent dividing of Europe and whether it would be acceptable to agree to losing Crimea by Ukraine at the cost of including Moscow in the discussion of that country's future. A vast majority of the Union, SPD, and Green Members condemned the Russian aggression against Crimea, but also called for the conflict de-escalation<sup>13</sup>.

Finally, it was agreed to play all the instruments, i.e. to carry out the dialogue with Moscow, extend the sanctions to Russia, if necessary, and to continue financial assistance for Ukraine. The main reference point was to aim at preventing the conflict spillover to eastern Ukraine, therefore on 23 March there appeared an official German proposal to send the OSCE observers to that country<sup>14</sup>.

## War in eastern Ukraine

After the Ukrainian Prime Minister signed on 21 March 2014 in Brussels the political part of the association agreement with the European Union, just as the pessimistic scenarios had foreseen, Russia started 'hybrid' warfare in the east of Ukraine in the Donets Basin, inhabited mainly by a Russian-speaking population. In April 2014, separatists supported militarily and financially by Moscow announced the creation of the self-proclaimed Donetsk People's Republic and Luhansk People's Republic. After seizing the key cities of Donbas, they announced a confederation of the two republics in May 2014. The Ukrainian military forces launched the so-called anti-terrorist action, whose objective was to recapture the main cities and liquidate the armed separatist troops.

In the face of a new threat of Ukraine's destabilisation and an outbreak of a Russian-Ukrainian war, the leaders of the EU countries requested that Germany engage more in settling this conflict. It was assumed that Germany with its good Kremlin relations was the most likely to influence the Russian policy. Importantly, Germany also enjoyed trust from the Ukrainian authorities who believed that their interests would be successfully defended by Berlin<sup>15</sup>.

Germany was ready to assume the role of an intermediary, at the same time playing a key role in the policy of the EU sanctions to Russia. In Chancellor Merkel's assumption, the German and EU policy towards the recent threat from the East should concentrate on political and economic support for Ukraine, especially that the presidential elections held on 25 May 2014 were won by the pro-Western Petro Poroshenko. There should also be a parallel dialogue with Moscow in order to find a diplomatic solution to the conflict and it should be accompanied by a gradual decrease of existing tensions. The third axis of action should be the sanctions to

<sup>13</sup> G. Bannas, 'Krim-Krise schweißt große Koalition zusammen', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 20.03.2014; T. Denkler, 'Vergiftete Atmosphäre', *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, 18.03.2014.

<sup>14</sup> A. Rinke, *Wie Putin...*, *op. cit.*, s. 39.

<sup>15</sup> B. Koszel, *Rola Niemiec w procesach decyzyjnych Unii Europejskiej w XXI wieku*, Poznań 2019, p. 328.

Russia, unwanted by everybody but which would be introduced should Russia continue its policy.

After the beginning of the Crimean invasion, on Washington's initiative international negotiations were undertaken in the so-called Geneva format with the participation of the USA, the EU, Ukraine and Russia to stop Russian operation in the east and south of Ukraine. In an agreement signed on 17 April, in exchange for amnesty the Kremlin agreed to disarm its militia and to clear the occupied administration buildings in Donbas. However, Russia ignored the agreement almost immediately and deliberately escalated tensions. On 25 April, the separatists captured 13 OSCE observers, including 4 Germans. Information from the Western intelligence indicated to the participation of the Russian special forces in this operation.

Chancellor Merkel, clearly disappointed with such a turn of events, announced further sanctions of the EU to the Russian Federation after a fruitless phone call with President Putin on 28 April. Yet, at the beginning of May, during her visit to Washington, it was clear that she did not seek confrontation with Russia motivating this with a need for economic cooperation with that country. She explained to President Obama that 6 European countries were in 100% dependent on the Russian supplies of fossil fuels and that they would not advocate drastic strengthening of the sanctions. Within the EU, Germany could lead the entire process of defusing tensions, but maintaining appropriate restraint at the same time<sup>16</sup>.

After P. Poroshenko's victory in the elections, a change in the Kremlin's policy could be noticed. The OSCE hostages were released, Putin recognised the legitimacy of the elections and proposed direct talks between the two countries' presidents.

In this situation, on 6 June during the celebrations of the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Normandy landings, a meeting between Chancellor Merkel, President Hollande and, for the first time, P. Poroshenko and V. Putin took place. They agreed to set up a group consisting of the Foreign Ministers of the four countries, whose task would be to settle the crisis in eastern Ukraine. Undoubtedly, such a solution was convenient for Putin. It excluded from the mediations the architect countries of the Eastern Partnership and the head of the EU diplomacy Federica Mogherini, which weakened the CFSP. For Moscow, this meant a return to the Moscow-cherished 'concert' of the great European powers<sup>17</sup>.

All the political calculations connected with setting up the 'Normandy Four' which started sessions on 3 July in Berlin failed due to the fact that in the east of Ukraine new incidents took place despite the formal ceasefire. They culminated on 17 July with the dramatic shooting down of the Malaysian passenger plane with 295 passengers aboard by a Russian BUK 1—M missile launched from the territories occupied by the separatists and this brought about a radical turn of the German public opinion. On 23 July, the German government demanded that additional international

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<sup>16</sup> 'Merkel und Obama einig über Ukraine', *Die Bundeskanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/angela-merkel/terminkalender/reiseberichte/merkel-und-obama-einig-ueber-ukraine-443838> [accessed: 10.02.2019]; A. Rinke, 'Vom Partner zum Gegner zum Partner?', *Die alte Russland-Politik ist tot – jetzt sucht Berlin nach einem neuen Ansatz*, *Internationale Politik*, 2015, no. 2, pp. 36–43.

<sup>17</sup> See: A. Rahr, 'Merkels Russlandpolitik. Zwischen Krisenmanagement und neuen Realitäten', *Welt-Trends. Das ausserpolitische Journal*, 2017, no. 131, p. 34.

sanctions should be imposed on Russia as it showed no interest in investigating the case of shooting down the aircraft. Surveys showed that 42% of Germans thought that in this new situation the government should take a tougher stance towards Russia, and relatively few (18%) opted for adopting a less aggressive position. One in five surveyed individuals said that the current position of the government was right<sup>18</sup>. The German Chancellor, concerned about the accident, called for an immediate and impartial investigation and for a ceasefire<sup>19</sup>. Although both parties to the conflict threw on each other the accusations of shooting down the plane, the EU and the USA reacted with the introduction of further sanctions to Russia (from 1 August 2014). Germany withheld the supplies of the state-of-the-art equipment and software for combat simulation for the modern army training centre in the town of Mulino, near Nizhny Novgorod, which was being built by the Rheinmetall concern. In retaliation, Russia imposed an import ban on western foodstuff<sup>20</sup>.

In the following weeks, Germany's dualistic policy towards the Russian Federation looked clearly out of balance. On 23 August, the Chancellor visited Ukraine where she announced that the territorial integrity and wellbeing of Ukraine were 'the main objective of the German policy' and that her stay was intended to prepare a direct meeting of the Russian and Ukrainian leaders. She declared that Kiev would receive from Germany credit guarantees for €500 million for water and energy, and €25 million for refugee aid<sup>21</sup>. On the next day, in the annual summer TV interview for ARD, the Chancellor emphasised the importance of good relations, especially in the economy and the energy sector, between the EU and Russia. She imagined 'harmonious co-existence' between the Eastern Partnership and the Eurasian Union countries, she diminished the importance of the association agreement signed with Ukraine, and ruled out the possibility of its NATO membership. She also confirmed the EU consent for arms export to the Transnistrian republic<sup>22</sup>.

On 4–5 September 2014, in Newport in Wales, a NATO summit took place. It was decided there that new programmes aimed at strengthening the Ukrainian armed forces would be introduced. On 5 September in Minsk, the first Russian-Ukrainian agreement was concluded. Among other things, the agreement provided for an immediate bilateral ceasefire, granting the OSCE the role as a monitor of the ceasefire, implementing decentralisation of power through adopting an act setting a special mode of operation of the local governments in individual areas of Donets and

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<sup>18</sup> *Nach MH17-Abschuss: Forderungen nach Handelssanktionen gegen Russland weiter gestiegen*, 2014, <https://yougov.de/news/2014/07/23/nach-mh17-abschuss-forderungen-nach-handelssanktio> [accessed: 10.02.2019].

<sup>19</sup> 'Bundeschkanzlerin Merkel zum Absturz einer Passagiermaschine über der Ost-Ukraine, 17 Juli 2014', *Die Bundeschkanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeschkanzlerin.de/Content/DE/Pressemitteilungen/BPA/2014/07/2014-07-17-merkel-flugzeug.html> [accessed: 10.02.2019].

<sup>20</sup> S. Meister, 'Putin richtig verstehen', *DGAPstandpunkt*, 2014, no. 6, <https://dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/25882> [accessed: 10.02.2019]; 'UE rozszerza sankcje wobec Rosji', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 17.07.2014.

<sup>21</sup> 'Initiativen für Kiew'. *Die Bundeschkanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeschkanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/initiativen-fuer-kiew-337978> [accessed: 11.02.2019]; 'Merkel will Ukraine mit halber Milliarde Euro helfen', *Die Welt*, 23.08.2014.

<sup>22</sup> 'Man muss miteinander sprechen', *Die Bundesregierung*, <https://www.deutschland-kann-das.de/dekd/politik/aktuelles/-man-muss-miteinander-sprechen--450200> [accessed: 11.02.2019].

Luhansk Oblasts, creating a security zone on both sides of the Russian-Ukrainian border, monitoring the situation at the border by the OSCE, and immediate release of prisoners of war and hostages by both parties<sup>23</sup>. On 16 September, at the same time in Kiev and in Strasbourg, the Association Agreement between Ukraine and the European Union was ratified<sup>24</sup>.

Prior to the ratification of the treaty with Ukraine, people colloquially called 'understanding Russia' (*Russlandversteher*) or 'understanding Putin' (*Putinversteher*) became active in Germany. Merkel strongly felt the accusations from the CSU that the federal government did not hold a constructive dialogue with Moscow. Steinmeier, who defended her, believed this two-track policy (talks within the contact group, including the OSCE in the peace process and, at the same time, the policy of sanctions) to be right and considered it to be a hallmark of the German diplomacy. In Germany, there existed a strong pro-Russian lobby connected most frequently with the business community (especially with Ost-Ausschuss der Deutschen Wirtschaft and its head Eckhard Cordes), and pacifist, leftist, cultural and entertainment organisations. One of the most renowned and distinguished German historians and political scientists of the older generation, Christian Hacke, calling for 'common sense' wrote that 'the West turned out to be very naïve thinking that the Russian president would stand idly by, watching the government in Kiev being supported in associating Ukraine with Western structures'<sup>25</sup>. Other arguments pointed to the fact that Russia and Germany were connected by a 'spiritual historical bond', and the government in Kiev were not democrats but corrupted oligarchs. Horst Teltschik, a former advisor to Chancellor H. Kohl and a leading representative of the 'understanding Russia', argued that Russia's vital interests in Ukraine should be understood and that Germany, as Russia's most important partner, was forced by the European Union to engage in issues which had nothing to do with the German interests. The arrogant attitude of the United States bore a large part of the responsibility, as it needlessly fuelled the tensions in Eastern Europe. Ukraine should get rid of its foolish dreams about the European Union and NATO membership and remain neutral. Ukrainian problems should not disturb Russia as it was needed by the West as a partner in combating terrorism, in the conflict in Syria and in addressing global concerns<sup>26</sup>. Theo Sommer, a renowned journalist and publisher of the weekly *Die Zeit*, argued in a similar vein. A dialogue about the new shape of the international order should be held with Moscow, but it should be taken for granted that Russia would never return Crimea, irrespective of how long the sanctions would last. Accepting the annexation of Crimea would be a convenient instrument for the West to force Russia to make political concessions<sup>27</sup>.

<sup>23</sup> *Protocol on the results of consultations of the Trilateral Contact Group (Minsk, 5.09.2014)*, <https://mfa.gov.ua/en/news-feeds/foreign-offices-news/27596-protocol-on-the-results-of-consultations-of-the-trilateral-contact-group-minsk-05092014> [accessed: 11.02.2019].

<sup>24</sup> 'Ukraine besiegelt Partnerschaft mit der EU', *Die Zeit*, 16.09.2014.

<sup>25</sup> Ch. Hacke, 'Der Westen und die Ukraine-Krise: Plädoyer für Realismus', *Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte*, 2014, no. 47/48, pp. 40–47.

<sup>26</sup> H. Teltschik, 'Türen nie zuschlagen! Warum der Westen weiter mit Russland reden muss', *Die Politische Meinung*, 2014, no. 58, pp. 24–29; F. Priess, Russland verstehen. 'Die Deutschen und ihre Krisenwahrnehmung', *Die Politische Meinung*, 2014, no. 67, pp. 18–23.

<sup>27</sup> Th. Sommer, 'Fünf vor acht/Frank-Walter Steinmeier. Er hat recht', *Die Zeit* online, 21.06.2016.

Other comments, particularly from the Left Party, implied that there could be no 'annexation' of Crimea. Yet again, it was argued that from the international law perspective it was justified secession expressing the territory inhabitants' will for self-determination stated in the referendum. Crimea was incorporated into the Russian Federation only after the referendum had been won<sup>28</sup>.

Chancellor Merkel's disappointment could be caused by the coalition SPD, whose large proportion clearly demonstrated their dislike for Ukraine and support for Putin. After the Russian annexation of Crimea, the architects of the German Eastern policy from the 1970s – former Chancellor Helmut Kohl and his advisor Egon Bahr – were presenting themselves as leading defenders of Russia. They were echoed by former Chancellor G. Schröder, former EU Commissioner for the EU Enlargement G. Verheugen, and former Prime Minister of the federal state Brandenburg Mathias Platzeck<sup>29</sup>.

On 5 December 2014, *Die Zeit* weekly published a manifesto entitled 'War in Europe again. Not in our name!' It pointed to the need to continue the policy of détente in international relations, and to continue the dialogue with Moscow because the need for security among the Russians was just as justified as among the Germans, the Poles, the Balts and the Ukrainians. Removing Russia from Europe would be 'unwise and dangerous for peace (...) the erroneous policy of the United States and the European Union, which was directed at moving western borders to the East without enhancing cooperation with Moscow, was perceived by Russia as a threat'. The initiators of the action were H. Teltschik, Walter Stütze, former Secretary of State in the Ministry of National Defence, and Antje Vollmer, former politician from the Green Party. The appeal was signed by over 60 people, including politicians (among others, G. Schröder, Otto Schilly, Roman Herzog, Eberhard Diepgen, Hans-Jochen Vogel). The appeal was also signed by the artistic elites of Germany, including the famous director Wim Wenders and popular actors Hanna Schygulla, Mario Adorf and Klaus Maria Brandauer<sup>30</sup>.

A few days later, 100 German experts on Eastern Europe criticized 'The Appeal of 60', accusing its signatories of ignoring facts. 'The Appeal of 100' was created on the initiative of the German political scientist Andreas Umland, an expert from the National University of Kiev-Mohyla Academy, and the retired historian from Viadrina European University Frankfurt (Oder) Karl Schlögel. The authors reproached Russia for violating peace agreements. They also emphasised the fact that the territorial integrity of Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova should not fall victim to the reckless policy of Germany towards Russia. Due to the tragic past of Ukraine, in which the Third Reich was involved, 'Germany could not turn a blind eye when it came to the sovereignty and survival of that post-Soviet republic'<sup>31</sup>.

After unsuccessful talks with President Putin, on 17 October in Milan during the EU-Asia summit, Chancellor Merkel realised that Russia was treating Ukraine as an

<sup>28</sup> R. Merkel, 'Kühle Ironie der Geschichte', *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, 7.04.2014.

<sup>29</sup> M. Księżniakiewicz, 'Opinia publiczna i elity polityczne w Niemczech wobec konfliktu na Ukrainie (listopad 2013 – marzec 2015)', *Przeгляд Zachodni*, 2015, no. 4, p. 138.

<sup>30</sup> 'Wieder Krieg in Europa? Nicht in unserem Namen!', *Die Zeit*, 5.12.2014.

<sup>31</sup> 'Aufruf von über 100 deutschsprachigen OsteuropaexpertInnen zu einer realitätsbasierten statt illusionsgeleiteten Russlandpolitik', *Der Tagesspiegel*, 11.12.2014.

element of systemic fight with the West, and Putin was accusing the USA of a desire to establish a new world order against Russia. Recounting the results of the talks in the Bundestag, Merkel stated that the Minsk agreement was not being observed and yet again called for Russia to 'make a decisive contribution to the conflict de-escalation'<sup>32</sup>.

On 12 September, with Germany's support, the EU introduced the harshest sanctions so far, and their objective was to stop the supply of materials and services for the production of the Russian oil at the sea and in the Arctic. The access to the capital markets of the EU and the USA was limited for Russian banks and state-owned companies. On the other hand, due to Russia's reservations, the EU announced that the economic part of the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement would enter into force only at the end of 2015<sup>33</sup>.

When Moscow accepted the results of the elections held on 2 November in two separatist republics (not monitored by the OSCE observers and contrary to the Ukrainian law), where majority of votes were for the independence of 'Novorossiya', on 5 November in Berlin Merkel declared the elections to be illegal and contrary to the Minsk provisions. She threatened to extend the list of sanctioned individuals by those policy makers who were behind the elections. Merkel counted on a direct meeting with President Putin on 15–16 November 2014 in Brisbane (Australia), where a summit of the world's richest countries G-20 took place. A four-hour-long direct conversation with the Russian leader turned out to be completely ineffective. The view points of the two politicians differed greatly. When A. Merkel was talking about NATO as an area of international cooperation of numerous countries in many parts of the world for common security, the President of Russia still perceived the Western alliance as a threat to his country's security and an attempt at strategic encircling by the USA. He declared the annexation of Crimea to be legally valid because it took place as a result of a democratically held referendum<sup>34</sup>.

A firm stance of the German Chancellor on the elections in 'Novorossiya' and new sanctions deepened the disputes with Steinmeier. He had repeatedly intimated that Russia must not be ignored or isolated because it was necessary for maintaining European security. In the ranks of the German social democrats and particularly Die Linke a prevalent conviction was that the Germans owed Moscow a debt of gratitude for its consent to their country's reunification, that economic cooperation was of prime importance, and the sanctions were an American element of the fight against Russia, in which Germany should not take part. On 17 November, in a press interview, Steinmeier stated that due to Russia's nervous reactions to the EU-Ukraine Association Agreement, and Brussels' reactions to establishing the Eurasian Economic Union, it would be advisable for the representatives of the two groups to meet. Ten days later, he tried to argue that the objective of the sanctions was not to bring Russia

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<sup>32</sup> 'Annäherung im Gasstreit'. *Die Bundeskanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/suche/annaeherung-im-gasstreit-425696> [accessed: 11.02.2019].

<sup>33</sup> *Niemcy zadowolone z odłożenia umowy o wolnym handlu UE-Ukraina*, <http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:HVFtIlMkm70J:wiadomosci.onet.pl/swiat/niemcy-zadowolone-z-odlozenia-umowy-o-wolnym-handlu-ue-ukraina/dt0lp+&cd=5&hl=pl&ct=clnk&gl=pl&client=firefox-b-ab> [accessed: 11.02.2019].

<sup>34</sup> R. Alexander, 'Die Kanzlerin hat ihre Putin-Strategie geändert', *Die Welt*, 16.01.2014.

to its knees. 'Refusing to cooperate and destabilised, Russia poses a great threat not only to itself, but also to other countries, and whoever says otherwise is doing a tremendous disservice to European security'<sup>35</sup>.

Before the December meeting of the Council of Europe, in her speech to the Bundestag Chancellor Merkel presented the German government's stance on the conflict in eastern Ukraine. She reminded her listeners that by annexing a part of the Ukrainian territory Russia had violated international law and attempts at down-playing that by anyone attested to the fact that they did not learn their historical lesson. In her opinion, Ukraine needed political, economic and humanitarian support, but it would be unwise to close channels of communication with Russia<sup>36</sup>. It followed from the German statements that in order to find a solution concerning eastern Ukraine, pressure on Moscow should be continued. At the same time, cooperation with the Russian Federation within the frameworks of the EU and the Eurasian Union was of prime importance and common grounds for this cooperation should be the fight against the Islamic State and... Ebola virus. The new government in Kiev would receive support from the EU and the economic and political situation in Ukraine would be stabilised. Further sanctions to Russia could be imposed and the old ones prolonged only if the situation in eastern Ukraine did not improve.

## The second Minsk Agreement

After a period of relative silence connected with the New Year and Eastern Christmas (7–9 January 2015), pro-Russian separatists resumed shelling Ukrainian positions; in Donbas, there increased the number of Russian troops and heavy equipment. Moved by this information, Chancellor Merkel cancelled direct meetings with the leaders of France, Ukraine, and Russia in Astana, but gave Steinmeier carte blanche<sup>37</sup>.

Despite the minister's efforts, at the beginning of February Chancellor Merkel decided that he had reached the limits of what he could do and that she should personally engage in the conflict settlement. The EU countries willingly agreed to entrust the German leader with a search for a diplomatic solution, as apart from ambitious France no one was keen on undertaking this mission: difficult and promising little hope for success. After numerous trips to Moscow, Kiev, and Washington, thanks to the German leader's persistent and conciliatory attitude, on 12 February 2015 the so-called Second Minsk Agreement was eventually signed<sup>38</sup>.

<sup>35</sup> „Globalisierung in der Rezession“ – Rede von Außenminister Frank-Walter Steinmeier beim 'Führungstreffen Wirtschaft' der Süddeutschen Zeitung am 27. November 2014 in Berlin, Auswärtiges Amt, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/newsroom/141127-bm-wirtschaftsgipfel/267186> [accessed: 11.02.2019].

<sup>36</sup> *Das Ergebnis einer richtigen Politik Rede zur Regierungserklärung durch Bundeskanzlerin Dr. Angela Merkel zum Europäischen Rat am 18./19. Dezember 2014 in Brüssel*, <https://www.cducsu.de/themen/aussen-europa-und-verteidigung/das-ergebnis-einer-richtigen-politik> [accessed: 11.02.2019]. See: A. Bielawska, 'Niemiecka chadecja wobec konfliktu rosyjsko-ukraińskiego', *Rocznik Integracji Europejskiej*, 2015, no. 9, p. 336.

<sup>37</sup> M. Czech, 'Angela Merkel ma dość obłudnej gry Kremla', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 13.01.2015.

<sup>38</sup> Details: 'Oto porozumienie z Mińska punkt po punkcie', *Gazeta Wyborcza*, 12.02.2015.

It was her personal success. It was a good move to engage France in these mediation efforts and to include this crisis as a regular item on the agenda of the Council of Europe meetings. The Chancellor could breathe a sigh of relief because President Putin did not manage to lead to a split among the member countries due to the increase of Islamic terrorism, escalation of xenophobic feelings, possible exit from the Union by Great Britain, and leaving the eurozone by Greece after the victory of the extremely populist left-wing party SYRIZA. The Chancellor maintained the faltering unity of the EU countries in terms of upholding the sanctions to Russia, and in her own country she managed to stop anti-Ukrainian propaganda and the coordinated offensive of the *Russlandversteher*.

Opinion polls, carried out by the Allensbach Institute of Public Opinion Research and commissioned by *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, published in March 2015, signalled a significant increase in Germany's distrust towards Russia. It was particularly striking that the Russian President's image among the Germans was harmed to the extent unwitnessed for years. Only 8% of the Germans had a positive opinion about the President, and 66% judged him unfavourably (by comparison: in 2001 as much as 43% of German citizens assessed Putin positively). 55% of the respondents considered the Russian policy towards Ukraine to be aggressive, 42% were afraid that Putin would not be satisfied with Ukraine only and would continue his hostile activities against other countries. Germany did not share the Russian interpretation of the events in Ukraine. Only 7% believed that the Russian soldiers were protecting Donbas inhabitants from pressure of the authorities in Kiev<sup>39</sup>.

The importance of Germany on the international scene, and particularly in the European Union, undoubtedly grew during the Ukrainian crisis and praise for its good management flowed to Berlin. Nevertheless, Merkel did not feel any satisfaction with this as she was under the impression that the Russian president was not a reliable or trustworthy partner for talks. However, the internal situation in Germany and pro-Russian feelings forced her to vacillate diplomatically. The fact that 400 thousand German jobs were in trade with Russia was impressive. The slogan *Russia first!* was still doing well and a perspective of tightening the relations of the EU with Russia and establishing a common economic area was considered appropriate<sup>40</sup>.

A large proportion of opinions expressed by specialists and experts present and visible in the German media said that Ukraine should come to terms with losing the two separatist provinces because the alternative would be deepening of the chaos and the collapse of the state. In Germany, the prevalent belief was that Russia adopted a strategy of long-term weakening of Ukraine, counting on its internal division.

Chancellor Merkel's personal dislike for Putin was manifested the fullest by her refusal to accept the invitation to the traditional celebration of Victory Day in the

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<sup>39</sup> 'Das Ansehen Putins. Die Grenzen der Propaganda. Eine Dokumentation des Beitrags von Dr. Thomas Petersen in der *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* Nr.65 vom 18.03.2015', [http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx\\_reportsdocs/FAZ\\_Ma\\_\\_rz\\_Russland.pdf](http://www.ifd-allensbach.de/uploads/tx_reportsdocs/FAZ_Ma__rz_Russland.pdf) [accessed: 11.02.2019].

<sup>40</sup> J. Braml, 'In der Sanktionsspirale. Auch im Interesse der Ukraine sollten wir Russland wirtschaftlich nicht isolieren', *DGAPstandpunkt*, 2015, no. 1, <https://dgap.org/de/article/getFullPDF/26413> [accessed: 11.02.2019]; W. Ischinger, 'Eine Aufgabe für Generationen, der Westen muss gegenüber Russland auf eine neue Doppelstrategie setzen', *Internationale Politik*, 2015, no. 1, pp. 30–35.

Russian capital on 9 May 2015. Many countries' leaders did that, yet for understandable reasons the German Chancellor could not demonstrate her dislike openly and she arrived in Moscow a day later, she also laid a wreath on the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. She listened without comment to less confident Putin who referred to enormous war damage and harm done to Soviet citizens, complained about decreasing German-Russian trade and yet again he argued in favour of the legality of Crimea's return to the motherland. However, he had no new offers to make<sup>41</sup>.

The vital economic interests that Putin spoke about, as well as did the German business communities interested in enhancing cooperation with Russia, did not have the same weight as in the earlier years of the oil prosperity. In 2016, German export to Russia amounted to only €21,5 billion, whereas in 2012, it was nearly twice that value (over €38 billion). A particular slump could be seen in the machinery and automobile industries. In 2015, the number of companies operating on the Russian market dropped to 5 583 (a decrease by 7%). In the statistics of the Federal Statistical Office, Russia ranked 13th in terms of turnover among all Germany's trading partners, owing to its raw materials export. The volume of trade was becoming significantly smaller than in 2012 (€48 billion compared to €80 billion), and more than twice smaller than the value of the Polish-German trade (€101 billion in 2016)<sup>42</sup>.

The conflict in Ukraine and repressions against the anti-Kremlin opposition, symbolised by the murder of one of the opposition leaders Boris Nemtsov in February 2015, began to determine the eastern policy of the Federal Republic. No more was there scope for Germany's exclusive policy towards Russia, but only for a policy within the EU's CFSP. A. Merkel's government, to a degree greater than before, began to support Ukraine and became one of the main promoters of its Association Agreement with the EU, which took effect at the beginning of January 2016. Germany's attitude to the security policy changed. The country understood that by promoting 'the culture of moderation' and weakening the Bundeswehr's military capabilities it painted itself into a corner and became a less reliable partner for NATO allies. Thus, during the NATO summit in Newport (4–5.09.2014), Germany committed itself to increase its military spending from the then-current level of 1.2% GDP to the NATO-recommended 2% GDP, and during the following meeting in Warsaw (8–9.07.2016) it advocated military strengthening of the so-called NATO's eastern flank. At the same time, a need for dialogue with Moscow and maintaining communication channels with it due to its growing role in the Syrian conflict was strongly emphasized. There was no scope for including Georgia or Ukraine in the NATO Membership Action Plan<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Ch. Rothenberg, 'Merkel kränkt Russland nur ein bisschen', NTV, 10.05.2015, <https://www.n-tv.de/politik/Merkel-kraenkt-Russland-nur-ein-bisschen-article15073911.html> [accessed: 11.02.2019]; B. Koszel, 'O „politycznej chemii” pomiędzy Angelą Merkel i Władimirem Putinem', in: A. Stelmach, M. Lorenc, M. Łukaszewski (eds.), *Kultura polityczna. W poszukiwaniu nowego paradygmatu. Księga jubileuszowa dedykowana Profesorowi Tadeuszowi Wallasowi*, Poznań 2018, p. 134.

<sup>42</sup> A. Godlewski, 'Niemieckie firmy coraz więcej inwestują w Rosji', 19.04.2017, <http://forsal.pl/artykuly/1035682,niemieckie-firmy-coraz-wiecej-inwestuja-w-rosji.html> [accessed: 11.02.2019].

<sup>43</sup> *Nato-Gipfel in Warschau. Ergebnisse von Warschau*, Die Bundesregierung, Berlin, 11.07.2016, <https://www.bundesregierung.de/Content/DE/Infodienst/2016/07/2016-07-11-nato-gipfel/2016-07-11-nato-gipfel-warschau.html> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

Cooperation in the area of energy was still a bright point. Signing the agreement concerning the construction of the second Nord Stream 2 gas pipeline in September 2015 symbolized the return to good economic relations. Although critics underline that this will increase Germany's dependence on the supply of gas from Russia to 60%, Merkel's government still considers it to be a purely commercial undertaking. Many German politicians indicate that in connection with the country's strategic reorientation of the energy policy and conversion into renewable energy, securing supplies of Russian raw materials is of prime importance for the country's energy security.

This certain helplessness of the German political elites was well delineated in 2016 by the reputable left-wing liberal monthly *WeltTrends. Das außenpolitische Journal*, which established a discussion forum (*Berlin und Moskau – wie weiter*) for opinions on the future of the German-Russian relations. Experts from various political options, speaking in the debate, indicated that the key to agreement and improvement of relations between Berlin and Moscow is the implementation of the Minsk provisions by the Russian Federation. The issue of European security and establishing its new structure with the participation of Russia should determine the activities of Germany and the European Union and push into the background the problems with democracy and human rights in Putin's country. The United States, which escalate tension in Ukraine, are hugely responsible for the conflict in that part of Europe, and the NATO summit in Warsaw on 8–9 July 2016 only increased the level of confrontation. The best solution would be to federalise Ukraine, demilitarise Crimea and create a special status for it. A new pact on partnership between the EU and Russia should be signed, where the emphasis would be on security, economy, and culture. The sanctions should be lifted, visas for Russian citizens waived, a free trade zone created between the EU and the Eurasian Union, and Russia should join the G-8 again<sup>44</sup>.

Due to the lack of progress in negotiations within the Normandy format framework in 2016 and at the beginning of 2017, as well as the intention to find out about the Kremlin's then-current plans, Chancellor Merkel paid a short three-hour visit to President Putin in Sochi (2.05.2017), and the formal pretext was a series of consultations the German head of state was intending to hold before the G-20 Group summit scheduled for 7–8 July 2017 in Hamburg. Nevertheless, the talks concerned mainly the situation in Ukraine and the civil war in Syria. President Putin assured the Chancellor that despite 'political difficulties' Germany remained Russia's most important partner, as demonstrated by close economic cooperation. He gave the impression that had it not been for Germany's categorical reaction regarding Crimea and Donbas, there would have been no sanctions. Merkel indicated that the condition for lifting the sanctions still was full compliance with the Minks

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<sup>44</sup> F. Elbe, 'Die Stunde der Diplomatie', *WeltTrends. Das außenpolitische Journal*, 2016, no. 119, pp. 51–54; A. Rahr, 'Gemeinsamkeiten und Missverständnisse', *WeltTrends. Das außenpolitische Journal*, 2016, no. 119, pp. 28–33; A. Iwanowna, 'Kooperation statt Sanktionen', *WeltTrends. Das außenpolitische Journal*, 2016, no. 119, pp. 45–50; A. Friesen, 'Zurück in die Zukunft? Möglichkeiten zur Kooperation der EU mit Russland', *WeltTrends. Das außenpolitische Journal*, 2016, no. 122, pp. 12–16.

arrangements. In her opinion, there was therefore no alternative to dialogue and each debate was a step forward<sup>45</sup>.

On 11 June, the European Union lifted the visa requirement for the citizens of Ukraine travelling to the European Union and Switzerland. In July, the process of ratifying the Association Agreement with Ukraine was concluded in member countries, which enabled its complete entry into force on 1 September 2017. Within the framework of the European support, a financial package of the total €12.8 billion was prepared and it was the largest package for a non-EU member<sup>46</sup>.

However, it was all Ukraine could expect from the EU and Germany. Either at the Eastern Partnership summit in Riga (21–22.05.2015), or at a subsequent meeting in Brussels (24.11.2017), no political declaration was made concerning a European perspective for at least some countries from the Eastern Partnership or regarding the policy of open door to the EU. France, Ireland, Portugal, Spain and the Netherlands, who did not even send their high-level delegations to the summit, were traditionally against not only the enlargement itself, but also even suggesting such a possibility<sup>47</sup>.

The scale of the already-limited German support for Ukraine was additionally influenced by the perspective of the September elections to the Bundestag. The election programmes of the main political parties did not include any mention of the German-Russian strategic partnership or perspectives for close cooperation. When the coalition cabinet with the SPD was established as a result of months of effort, which coincided with the presidential elections won by Putin in Russia, the matters connected with the conflict in the east of Ukraine, due to the lack of perspective for settling them, were not among Chancellor Merkel's priorities. She concentrated on mitigating internal disputes in Germany and restoring her image after the refugee crisis. She was aware of her last term in office and the future of the European Union became her primary objective as well as devising – together with France – its development strategy for the coming years.

Germany and the European Union returned to the conflict in the East only in the middle of 2018. It was hoped that, in the face of the coming world Football Cup in Russia, for reasons of prestige President Putin would be interested in calming the existing conflict, which could be used for constructive talks about the conflict in Donbas.

According to the arrangements concerning the continuation of the negotiations within the Normandy format, the brunt of the negotiations was taken by the new Foreign Minister Heiko Maas (SPD), who had no diplomatic experience in that regard. After taking office, he accused Russia of aggression towards Ukraine, yet he paid his first visit not to Kiev but to Moscow. On 18 August 2018 in Meseberg, working

<sup>45</sup> R. Alexander, 'Angela Merkel und Wladimir Putin schenken sich nichts', *Die Welt*, 2.05.2017; S. Żerko, 'Rozmowy Merkel-Putin w Soczi', *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego*, 2017, no. 305, <https://iz.poznan.pl/publikacje/biuletyn-instytutu-zachodniego/biz-nr-305-rozmowy-merkel-putin-w-soczi> [accessed: 12.02.2019]; B. Koszel, 'O „politycznej chemii”', *op. cit.*, p. 134.

<sup>46</sup> *Ukraine and the EU*, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/1937\\_en](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage/1937_en) [accessed: 12.02.2019].

<sup>47</sup> *Szczyt Partnerstwa Wschodniego 2017: Razem możemy więcej*, Council of Europe – press announcement, [http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:4qoohXZnyBOJ:europa.eu/rapid/press-release\\_IP-17-4845\\_pl.pdf+&cd=2&hl=pl&ct=clnk&gl=pl&client=firefox-b-ab](http://webcache.googleusercontent.com/search?q=cache:4qoohXZnyBOJ:europa.eu/rapid/press-release_IP-17-4845_pl.pdf+&cd=2&hl=pl&ct=clnk&gl=pl&client=firefox-b-ab); *East Partnership Summit (24 November 2017)*, <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/pl/eapsummit> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

consultations between Chancellor Merkel and President Putin took place. Her expectations had been specified in a press statement before the summit and amounted to maintaining the position that implementing the Minsk arrangements was necessary as a condition for stabilising the situation. Germany supported the Ukrainian idea of sending a UN mission ('Blue Helmets') to Donbas, and was willing to continue the talks in the Normandy format. The Chancellor left no doubt that Ukraine had to play a role in the transit of gas to Europe, even after putting Nord Stream 2 pipeline into service. She emphasised that settling the conflict in Syria and avoiding a humanitarian catastrophe was important for her. She confirmed that she respected the nuclear agreement with Iran, but she was concerned about the operation of this country in Yemen and Syria<sup>48</sup>.

No specific arrangements concerning eastern Ukraine were made in Meseberg because Germany and Russia maintained their earlier positions. However, due to Washington's policy towards the EU and Germany, and the situation in Syria and Iran, the political weight of President Putin engaged in the Middle Eastern conflicts increased significantly on the international stage and forced Germany to adopt a more pragmatic line towards Moscow. Aspiring to play the role of a moderator in peace processes in various flash points in the world, Chancellor Merkel needed a success, yet President Putin was aware of the situation and he was intending to address the expectations of the leader of the German government, but on his own terms<sup>49</sup>.

The increasing role of Russia in the Middle Eastern conflict became evident on 28 October, during the Istanbul meeting of Germany, France, Russia, and Turkey leaders. A controversial photograph of President E. Macron and A. Merkel holding hands with Putin and President of Turkey Erdoğan went all over the world. The 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the end of the First World War was also spectacularly celebrated in Paris with the participation of leaders from 60 countries, among others including President of the USA Donald Trump, Putin, Merkel and Macron.

On 25 November, another escalation of tension between Russia and Ukraine took place as a result of stopping three Ukrainian naval vessels by Russian special forces in the Kerch Strait. Ukraine considered the Russian operation to be an act of aggression and declared martial law on some of its territories: the areas neighbouring Russia and the separatist Transnistria in Moldova, and those at the Black Sea and the Azov Sea.

Commentators believed that the incident was convenient for Presidents Putin and Poroshenko. Due to the fact that oil prices fell below Russia's expectations, its economy was driven to stagnation, which caused social unrest and less support for Putin (58–61%). Before the presidential elections coming in March 2019, the

<sup>48</sup> 'Pressestatements von Bundeskanzlerin Merkel und dem russischen Präsidenten Putin', *Die Bundeskanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/pressestatements-von-bundeskanzlerin-merkel-und-dem-russischen-praesidenten-putin-1514454> [accessed: 12.02.2019]; 'Internationale Krisenherde im Blick', *Bundeskanzlerin*, <https://www.bundeskanzlerin.de/bkin-de/aktuelles/internationale-krisenherde-im-blick-1504612> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

<sup>49</sup> See: W. Rodkiewicz, A. Kwiatkowska-Drożdż, 'Putin u Merkel w Mesebergu', *Analizy OSW*, <https://www.osw.waw.pl/pl/publikacje/analizy/2018-08-22/putin-u-merkel-w-mesebergu> [accessed: 12.02.2019]; J. Kiwerska, 'Prezydentura Trumpa i relacje z Niemcami', *Biuletyn Instytutu Zachodniego*, 2018, no. 369, <https://www.iz.poznan.pl/publikacje/biuletyn-instytutu-zachodniego/biz-nr-369-prezydentura-trumpa-i-relacje-z-niemcami> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

support for P. Poroshenko, accused of introducing reforms ineptly, was at the level of 10–15%. Diverting attention from internal problems was therefore beneficial for both politicians<sup>50</sup>.

In order to specify the German stance on the recent phase of the conflict, on 30 November the Foreign Office published a document presenting the government's interpretation of the crisis in Ukraine. It was mentioned that the annexation of Crimea and unleashing the war in the East cost 10 thousand lives. The German government 'advocating for peace and stability' insisted that:

- 1) the Minsk arrangement should be introduced (negotiations concerning that should be continued with France);
- 2) violation of international law would not be tolerated (Ukraine's territorial integrity had to be respected);
- 3) the OSCE mission should be strengthened and protected (it was indispensable for maintaining the peace process);
- 4) a UN peacekeeping mission should be considered (support for a UN mission on condition that it did not enhance the existing *status quo*);
- 5) Germany would support economic reforms in Ukraine for the state reconstruction and civil society organisation, as well as modernising administration and greater decentralisation<sup>51</sup>.

The actions taken up since 2014 by Germany and the European Union towards Russia showed the helplessness of European institutions in the face of the Kremlin's aggressive policy. Although the policy of sanctions brought measurable losses to the Russian economy, it was a price Putin was prepared to pay in order to strengthen his position in the country on the wave of nationalistic sentiments and to win again presidential elections in March 2018. Despite his abysmal image in the world, by using social media on the internet he intervened in the presidential election in the USA in 2016, and most probably in Germany in 2017; he fuelled tension in the east of Ukraine; he contributed to the death of Sergey Skripal, a former Russian intelligence officer; and provoked the incident at the Azov Sea. Russia has in its hands all the instruments to destabilise Ukraine, and undoubtedly will not allow for any peaceful regularisation of the situation in eastern Ukraine until the presidential elections in that country in March 2019, but it will plot and fuel tensions counting on internal divisions in the parties and the political elite of Ukraine. Putin still assumes that Germany's and the EU's financial assistance will be insufficient and that Ukraine will yield under the burden of the economic crisis and Poroshenko will lose control over the situation in the country. Even if he wins the elections, he will have no other option but to agree for the country's federalisation and waive the policy of closer relations with the EU and NATO. An excellent means of putting pressure on the authorities in Kiev is already the Nord Stream 2 pipeline which can cause closing of the Ukrainian transmission networks to the west of Europe and result in difficult to calculate losses to the Ukrainian economy.

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<sup>50</sup> *Zwischenfall im Schwarzen Meer mehr als ein Ablenkungsmanöver Poroschenkos?*, <https://de.sputniknews.com/politik/20181210323239645-poroschenko-kertsch-konflikt-darstellung> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

<sup>51</sup> *Auf welche Strategie Deutschland im Ukraine-Konflikt setzt*, Auswärtiges Amt, <https://www.auswaertiges-amt.de/de/aussenpolitik/laender/ukraine-node/ukraine-konflikt/2165944> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

Laying laboriously the foundations of its statehood, struggling with its oligarchic economy, inefficient administration and corruption, threatened with destabilisation by its powerful neighbour, Ukraine has never been an important political subject for Germany, but has always been a reference point for the German relations with Russia. When deciding to support the European aspirations of Ukraine, Chancellor A. Merkel, Presidents F. Hollande and E. Macron had no way out. On the grounds of the past experience, none of the countries could accept the violation of territorial integrity of any European country, as this would open Pandora's box, especially in the areas of the so-called 'frozen' conflicts. They were aware that many European countries were simply indifferent to the fate of Ukraine. Chancellor Merkel's greatest success was maintaining the unity of the EU countries in regard to sanctions to Russia. This was achieved with greatest difficulty and was one of the reasons for disappointment for President Putin who counted on breaking the EU solidarity. The German politician, weakened by the refugee crisis, attacked at home and in many EU countries, was additionally criticized in Germany by various sorts of pacifists and 'understanding Russia' for the way of dealing with Russia, which was, according to them, humiliating for President Putin. A movement consisting of representatives of the right-wing CSU (E. Stoiber, H. Seehofer), the increasingly important AfD, but also of politicians from Die Linke, was created in Germany. The movement has also been joined by some well-known SPD politicians (G. Schröder, S. Gabriel, F.-W. Steinmeier M. Platzeck, G. Erler) and influential business circles traditionally betting on close cooperation with Russia. It is also widely held that the West is guilty of 'transgression' against Russia, which is symbolised by NATO enlargement, the Organisation's intervention in Kosovo, the war in Iraq, the intervention in Libya, and the policy towards western Syria, which forced Russia only to react to the expansionism of the West<sup>52</sup>.

Due to President D. Trump's anti-EU policy and his weakening of the USA's credibility as an ally, an alliance with Moldova would be the only guarantee for the European security. Arguments connected with preventing the risk of military escalation in interactions with NATO, as well as with the conflicts in Ukraine and Syria speak in favour of a dialogue with Russia; there is a need for joint control of armament, managing humanitarian conflicts, cooperation in combating terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. In exchange for reducing the pressure on Ukraine, it is suggested that Putin be tempted with a perspective of closer relations with the EU, establishing a common EU-Eurasian Union economic area (from Lisbon to Vladivostok) and Russia's active participation in tackling global issues<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>52</sup> P. Strutyński (ed.), *Ein Spiel mit dem Feuer. Die Ukraine, Russland und der Westen*, Köln 2014.

<sup>53</sup> G. Erler, 'Den Eskalationsprozess stoppen. Ziele der Deutschen Russlandpolitik', *Russland-Analysen*, 2018, no. 354, <http://www.laender-analysen.de/russland> [accessed: 12.02.2019]; J. Braml, *op. cit.* See: W. Ischinger, *op. cit.*, p. 34.

## Conclusions

Russia's jostling in the international arena and its quite presumptuous effort to obtain greater influence on the world politics forced Germany to review its eastern policy and to assess its relations with Moscow in a more realistic and critical way. The words about strategic partnership and Partnership for Modernisation disappeared from the vocabulary of the politicians from the Federal Chancellery and Auswärtiges Amt<sup>54</sup>. Economic cooperation outside the energy sector lost its dynamics, and China grew to become the main recipient of the enormous German industrial production<sup>55</sup>. Nevertheless, the largest yet unwanted by President Putin success is the fact that the EU started paying attention to the issues of its own security and that NATO started gradually strengthening the eastern flank with the presence of the American troops in this part of Europe.

It became especially painful for the Germans, presenting themselves as and considered to be Russia's most important partner in Europe, that W. Putin's administration ostentatiously ignored Chancellor Merkel's advice and appeals, particularly in terms of settling the conflict in Ukraine. Some researchers believe that since 2005 Germany has been partly responsible for the situation in Russia. Lured by the illusion of strategic partnership, Germany ignored the threats to the European order and security coming from Moscow, and it overestimated its real influence on the Russian policy<sup>56</sup>.

Merkel does not trust Putin and there is no 'political attraction' between the two leaders, yet she does realise that the role and importance of this power – which has been demonstrated by the civil war in Syria – as an essential component in international security and as a major supplier of fossil fuels must not be ignored. On the other hand, leaving Ukraine and the pro-European attitude of its inhabitants on their own or abandoning them would be an irreparable loss to the process of building European unity. Guided by these reasons, Germany attempts to put Ukraine on the European track with the use of money and counselling, at the same time being aware that without thorough internal reforms this country would face destabilisation and an increase of social antagonisms.

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<sup>54</sup> T. Forsberg, 'From Ostpolitik to "frostpolitik"? Merkel, Putin and German foreign policy towards Russia', *International Affairs*, 2016, no. 92, p. 21; B. Koszel, 'Are we witnessing the twilight of the strategic German-Russian partnership under Angela Merkel?', *Przeegląd Strategiczny*, 2018, no. 11, pp. 129–151.

<sup>55</sup> L. Delcour, S. Meister, 'Russland und der Ukraine-Konflikt: Plädoyer für einen realistischen und interessenorientierten Dialog', *DGAPkompakt*, April 2018, no. 9, <https://dgap.org/de/think-tank/publikationen/dgapkompakt/vorteilhafte-verschiedenheit> [accessed: 12.02.2019].

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*Wpływ konfliktu na Ukrainie (2014–2018)  
na relacje Niemiec z Rosją  
Streszczenie*

Po zjednoczeniu Niemiec, rządy Republiki Federalnej forsowały politykę strategicznego partnerstwa z Rosją, szczególnie w obszarze gospodarki. Dopiero rząd A. Merkel w większym stopniu zaczął zwracać uwagę na łamanie praw człowieka w Rosji i sparaliżowanie opozycji. Agresja Rosji na Ukrainę zachwiała podstawami współpracy niemiecko-rosyjskiej. Od połowy 2014 r. Niemcy prowadziły politykę dwutorowości: sankcji wobec FR i szukania dialogu z Moskwą w kwestiach międzynarodowych. Niemcy obecnie w większym stopniu próbują „europeizować” swoją politykę wobec Federacji Rosyjskiej. Niemcom i UE Rosja jest nadal potrzebna jako strategiczny partner w rozwiązywaniu problemów Bliskiego Wschodu i walki z międzynarodowym terroryzmem.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Niemcy, Rosja, konflikt na Ukrainie 2014–2018

*The Influence of the Conflict in Ukraine (2014–2018)  
on Germany's Relations with Russia  
Abstract*

After the re-unification of Germany, the governments of the Republic were pushing for the policy of strategic partnership with Russia, especially in the area of economy. It was only A. Merkel's government who started paying more attention to the violation of human rights in Russia and to paralysing the opposition. The Russian aggression against Ukraine shook the foundations of the German-Russian cooperation. From the middle of 2014, Germany carried out a two-track policy of sanctions to the Russian Federation and looking for a dialogue on international issues with Moscow. Currently, Germany is trying to 'Europeanise' more its policy towards Russia. Germany and the EU still need Russia as a strategic partner in settling the problems of the Middle East and fighting against international terrorism.

**Key words:** Germany, Russia, the conflict in Ukraine 2014–2018

*Der Einfluss des Konflikts in der Ukraine (2014–2018)  
auf die Beziehungen zwischen Deutschland und Russland  
Kurzfassung*

Nach der Wiedervereinigung Deutschlands haben die Regierungen der BRD die Politik der strategischen Partnerschaft mit Russland durchgesetzt, insbesondere im Bereich der Wirtschaft. Erst Merckels Regierung wurde wesentlich aufmerksamer auf die Verletzung der Menschenrechte in Russland und die Lähmung der Opposition. Russlands Aggression gegen die Ukraine erschütterte die Grundlage der deutsch-russischen Zusammenarbeit. Seit Mitte 2014 hat Deutschland die zweigleisige Politik geführt: Sanktionen gegen die Russische Föderation und Suche nach dem Dialog mit Moskau in der internationalen Fragen. Deutschland versucht jetzt seine Politik gegenüber der Russischen Föderation stärker zu „europäisieren“. Deutschland und Europäische Union brauchen weiterhin Russland als strategischen Partner bei der Problemlösung des Nahen Ostens und dem Kampf gegen internationalen Terrorismus.

**Schlüsselwörter:** Deutschland, Russland, Konflikt in der Ukraine 2014–2018

***Влияние конфликта в Украине (2014–2018)  
на отношения Германии и России  
Резюме***

После объединения Германии, правительство ФРГ проводило оживленную политику стратегического партнерства с Россией, особенно в сфере экономики. Только правительство Ангелы Меркель, в большей степени, начало обращать внимание на нарушение прав человека в России и притеснения оппозиции. Агрессия России против Украины нанесла удар также по российско-германскому сотрудничеству. С середины 2014 г. Германия ведет политику двух направлений: санкции против РФ и поиск диалога с Москвой по международным вопросам. На сегодняшний день Германия в большей степени пытается «европеизировать» свою политику в отношении РФ. Германии и ЕС, Россия по-прежнему нужна как стратегический партнер в решении проблем Ближнего Востока и борьбы с международным терроризмом.

**Ключевые слова:** Германия, Россия, конфликт в Украине 2014–2018

